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ABSTRACT

The motivation to learn of African American high school students was examined by asking them about their favorite and least favorite classes. Two hundred and seventy-five students attending three urban high schools were randomly selected from their history classes to respond to a questionnaire on their perceptions of ability, goals, and reasons for disliking their least favorite class. There was a positive motivational pattern reported for their favorite classes. The students scored high on three variables that have been found to be most important for engagement and achievement: learning goals, future consequences, and perceived ability. Their reason for disliking the least favorite class was usually that the teacher was boring, and not because of perception of ability. Analysis of interview data for these students showed that teacher attitudes and methods of instruction were the significant reasons for liking and disliking the favorite and least favorite classes. Students also reported that the race of the teacher affected motivation in the classroom. These results show positive motivational orientations among students when their favorite classes were an issue. (Author/SLD)

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Descriptions of Motivation among African American High School Students for their Favorite and Least Favorite Classes

We examined the motivation to learn of African American high school students by asking them about their favorite and least favorite classes. Two hundred and seventy-five students attending three urban high schools were randomly selected from their history class to respond to a questionnaire on their perceptions of ability, goals, and reasons for disliking their least favorite class. There was a positive motivational pattern reported for their favorite class. The students are very high on three variables that have been found to be most important for engagement and achievement; learning goals; future consequences; and perceived ability. Their reasons for disliking the least favorite class was mainly because the teacher was boring and not because of perception of ability. The analysis of the interview data revealed that teacher attitudes and methods of instruction are the significant reasons for liking and disliking the favorite and least favorite classes. The students also reported that the race of the teacher effects motivation in the classroom.

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Many educators recognize that the effectiveness of educational programs is very much tied to student motivation. Even though it may appear that students are unmotivated, it is still discouraging to hear classroom teachers say that their students are just not motivated to learn. Many people assume that motivation problems are most pronounced in the "inner city" schools, and since those urban schools are largely populated by African American students, many people assume that African American children must be among the least motivated. Rather than assume that African American students in urban public schools have motivational problems, we conducted theoretically grounded research in order to provide some descriptive information about motivation among African American students in urban high schools.

In the past educators really did not know what was meant by motivation to learn. However, there has been a great deal of research in the last decade or so that provides information and evidence regarding the factors that influence a student's motivation to invest their time and energy in learning. This research supports the importance of perception of ability, or one's confidence that they will be successful in a given learning situation (Bandura, 1986; Greene & Miller, 1986; Schunk, 1991), and the different goals one has relative to the situation (e.g., Ames & Archer, 1988; Meece, Blumenfeld & Hoyle, 1988; Maehr, 1984; Miller et al., 1994; Schutz,1993; Pintrich & Garcia, 1991). That is, students have differing amounts and types of motivation in different achievement situations (Maehr, 1984).

In light of this recent literature on motivation, we examined the motivation to learn of African American high school students by asking them about their favorite and least favorite class. For the favorite class, we asked them about their perceptions of ability and about four different goals. For the least favorite class we asked about possible reasons for not liking the class. We thought that their responses would allow us to infer the factors that decrease motivation. We had possible reasons that were related to the interest, difficulty and relevance of the subject matter; reasons that were related to the teacher's teaching style; and reasons related to teacher-student interactions. We also asked about perceptions of ability. We knew from the literature that it could be the case that high perceptions of ability might be found in the favorite class, but not in the least favorite class.

Method

Participants

The participants were 275 African-American students in grades 9 - 12 from three "inner city" high schools located in the Mid-south. At the request of the district administration, volunteers were from 13 different History classes. The students who participated in the qualitative portion of the study, were selected for the interviews based on short answer questions they provided on their surveys. The sample used for the qualitative portion of this study includes thirteen high school students in grades nine through twelve. The students attend three high schools in an urban midwestern school district. All of the students interviewed were African Americans which included seven females and six males.

Instruments

A survey was used for data collection from the entire sample, an interview questionnaire was used with a subset of students who agreed to an interview. The survey consisted of 54 items in all, 49 of which used a five point Likert-type format with "strongly disagree " and "strongly agree" as the anchors. The survey was divided into three major sections. For the first section, participants were asked to think about their favorite class while responding to items that probed their goals related to goals for learning, performance, future consequences, (e.g., money, college admission), and pleasing the teacher. Then they responded to items about their perceptions of ability in the favorite class. The items from this first section were all adapted from those used by Miller et al. (1994).

The second section stated possible reasons for disliking the least favorite class and the perception of ability in the class. Examples of the reasons are as follows: I don't understand the concepts; I don't like the subject, I don't like the way the teacher teaches; it's too hard; the teacher is boring; this subject is not important for my future; etc.

The third section consisted of the last 5 short answer items. The items included demographic questions and questions about whether they had experienced any racial bias in their favorite and least favorite class.

Interview Questions

There were several questions that were posed during the interview. For the purposes of this study, only four of the questions are relevant. The four questions include; What is your favorite class and why, What is your least favorite class and why, Have you experienced racial bias in your class, and Does the race of the teacher affect your motivation?

Procedures

Parent consent forms were sent home two weeks before the administration of the survey. Students receiving parental consent were eligible to participate in the study. Students who chose to participate completed the consent forms and the survey. The survey was administered during students regularly scheduled history class. Some participants were selected based upon their written responses to participate in interview.

Results and Discussion

Survey Data

Because this was a descriptive study, the data were summarized in terms of means and standard deviations. Cronbach alpha coefficients were calculated for the subscales that had multiple items on the survey. As can be seen from table 1, we found that the internal consistency reliabilities were in the acceptable range for an affective measures. Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations for all of the variables assessed related to the students' favorite class, and a selection of seven possible reasons for not liking the least favorite class. Of the 21 possible reasons they responded to, these seven seemed to best representative of their reasons.

Looking first at the motivations noted for the favorite class, what we find is a very positive motivational pattern. These students are very high on the three variables that have been found to be most important for engagement and achievement: Learning goals; future consequences; and perceived ability. They tend not to focus on performance goals, which is good, since those goals have been found to exert a negative influence on cognitive engagement. They were also somewhat low on the goal of pleasing the teacher. Although this goal has been found to show some positive relationships with effort and persistence among high school students (Montalvo, 1994) it does not seem to function as predictably as do the other goals. Its information value warrants further study.

The results regarding reasons for not liking the least favorite class were somewhat surprising to us. We were delighted to see that the absence of goals related to learning and future consequences were not commonly endorsed by this group. We were not surprised to see that lack of fun and boring teacher were among the reasons, but we thought we would also see some teacher-student interactions as reasons that were also common. We found it interesting that although perceived ability was lower than for the favorite class, it was still too high to be a major reason for not liking the class.

The frequency distributions of the responses showed a negative skewness in some of the distributions. There were three variables with only a small percentage of respondents scoring below a 3 on the point scale. For example, learning goals had less than 11%, future consequences had less than 9%, and perception of ability in the favorite class had less than 4%. This shows that students tended to score higher on these variables.

Table 1

Reliability coefficients, Means and Standard Deviations for Goals and Perceptions of Ability in the Favorite Class and Reasons for Not Liking the Least Favorite Class

Variable	alpha	Mean	SD	Variable	alpha	Mean	SD
Favorite Class				Least Favorite Class			
Learning Goal	.86	4.22	.82	No learning goals	-	1.95	1.23
Future Conseqs.	.82	4.60	.75	No future conseqs.	.78	2.03	1.23
Performance Goal	.75	2.78	.94	Don't like subject	-	3.24	1.46
Pleasing the Teacher	.72	2.89	1.05	Class not fun	-	3.57	1.39
Perceived Ability	.68	4.12	.58	Teacher boring	.74	3.81	1.46
				- Prejudiced against me	-	1.97	1.39
				- doesn't listen	-	2.74	1.46
				- doesn't show respect	-	2.44	1.20
				Perceived Ability	.81	3.46	.96

Notes. 1) All of the variables for the favorite class were assessed with multiple items. Except for Perceived Ability, all of the variables shown for the least favorite class were assessed with single items. 2) All of the variables were measured on a 5 point scale.

Interview Data

Reasons for Liking Favorite Class

I began the interview by asking the students what their favorite class was and why it was their favorite class. There reasons for liking their favorite class, can be classified in three dominant categories. The categories are as follows: *Teacher; attitude and method, Like the subject, and Perception of Ability.*

Teacher - Attitude

This category is defined as the attitude that the teacher approach teaching and what the students referred to as "fun and nice." Over half of the students reported that the reason they liked their favorite class was because of the teachers attitude and approach to teaching. One student described the teacher this way, "the teacher is nice and makes learning fun." Another student commented that "the work is easy and the teacher is fun, and even if the work was hard, it wouldn't be hard to get help because my teacher is nice."

Teacher - Methods

This category is defined as the method that the teacher uses during instruction. Three students reported that the reason they enjoyed their favorite class is because the way the teacher teaches. One student commented that " I like the class because the teacher challenges us and makes us think past the class."

Subject

There were a couple of students who liked their favorite class because of the subject itself. One student felt that his class allowed him to do what he likes best and that is to act. Another student enjoyed the subject because he reported that he liked problem solving.

Perception of Ability

One student expressed their reason for enjoying the class because of his perceived ability in the course. He states, " It is that writing comes sort of easy to me, just expressing how I feel and that is something I can do right."

In summarizing the previous data, it is interesting to note that three fourths of the sample stated that the reason for liking their favorite class was, the teachers' attitude or their method of teaching. In examining the attitude of the teachers, the students continually referred to their teachers as "fun". I asked the students what they meant by fun, and they said, makes jokes, kids around, makes them comfortable, is nice and can relate to the students.

Reasons for Disliking the Least Favorite Class

The second question that I asked the students was, what their least favorite class was and why it was their least favorite class. Their reasons for disliking their least favorite class, can also be classified in three dominant categories. The categories were the same as for the previous question which are: *Teacher; attitude and method, Dislike the subject, and Perception of Ability.*

Teacher - Attitude

Almost half of the responses fell into this category with students listing the teacher's attitude for being the reason they disliked their least favorite class. Some of the students expressed their opinion that the teacher just couldn't relate to students and African American students in particular. Other students stated bluntly that their teacher was a "racist." One student commented" I don't like this class because the teacher is racist and sexist. He writes up the black people more and calls us bad words."

Teacher - Method

Close to half of the students reported reasons having to do with the methods that the teacher uses in the classroom. Their responses ranged from the giving too much work and not enough time to finish to not understanding the teachers teaching methods. One student stated, " With the teacher and instruction I don't know what's going on in there. I am just sitting in there. The teacher, all he does is lecture all day long."

Subject

There were three students who disliked their least favorite class because of the subject itself. One student commented on the amount of time that it takes to master the subject and that he did not want to spend the time. Another student said that the subject required a lot of work and they did not want to do it. Another student just expressed their dislike for the subject.

Perception of Ability

One student responded that the reason they disliked their least favorite class had to with their perceived ability. He stated that "Art is not really my field. I'm not an artist and I can't draw."

Just as the previous question revealed, more than three fourths of the students stated that the reason for disliking their least favorite class was, the teachers' attitude or their method of teaching. Just as the data for the favorite class exposed, the teachers' attitude influenced whether the students liked the class or not. In examining the least favorite class, there were some racial issues that affected some of the students reasons for disliking the class.

Racial Bias in the Classroom

At the end of the survey, students were asked to describe any racial bias in their favorite or least favorite class. An analysis of their responses, produced five categories. The categories are: *Teaching to Whites, Cultural Differences, Bias Treatment, Segregation, and None.*

Teaching to Whites

A couple of the students responded to this question by stating that their teacher seems to teach to the white students in the class and not the blacks. One student commented "... the White people sit in the front and the Black people stay behind. When he talks, explains the lesson, he only talks to them. When we ask him a question, he's like you're not listening anyway. I think he's only trying to teach them." The other student shared a similar opinion about his least favorite class by stating, " the Blacks sit on one side and the Whites on the other side. Sometimes you will notice the teachers, they will standing like this, looking directly at them while we over here looking at them like, why? We just start talking and then he just directs his attention back over there when we start talking and he's just like, why are you all talking? Because you are not teaching us, you are looking over there at them and answering their questions. You are not even listening to the answers that we are giving you."

Cultural Differences

In this category a student reported that the teacher was not a racist, he just doesn't understand the cultural differences between blacks and whites. He opinion is indicated in the following statement, "I just feel like he didn't really know how to interact with black people, because he obviously had never been around a lot of black people before in his life. I can't really fault him for that, because he tried to get a long with us. Our humor and his humor are two different types of things. The way we act and talk is different from the way he would act and talk. Really, I don't think he made an effort to really get to know us. I don't think he was racist, it's just he didn't know how to do it."

Bias Treatment

In this category the students shared their thoughts that they felt the Caucasian students in their classes received preferential treatment. One student commented, " He like, we would ask him can we go to the library and he'll say no, because you are not going to come back, but, he'll let the white people go." Another student reported," In an English class, no Black kids in her class are passing. All the White kids have "A"s and "B"s and all the Black kids in her class have "C"s and "D"s and "F"s. It was like the majority in my class had "F"s and the rest of them had...if she had one favorite and they acted White she would probably give them a "B". Also, she had a lot of kids that would talk a lot in her class. The White kids would get up and they would scream and holler and stuff and she wouldn't say anything but, sit down. But if the Black kids did something she would kick them up with quickness and tell us not to come back to her class."

Segregation

Some students felt the racial bias in their classroom had to do with them being segregated in the classroom. One student described the experience in these words, " He sits certain kids on different sides like blacks on one side, Mexicans in the middle, and whites on the other side and Indian and Asian on the other. It's like a pattern. He doesn't do that on purpose, but you can tell. You can see it. He also sits the blacks on one side because he thinks that we cheat. Well sometimes we help each other with work and stuff so we go over there and look off of each others paper. So he sits most of the smart people on one side and he sits the others on the other side so he knows if he catches us out of our seat that we're cheating or something." Another student recounted their experience by explaining, " Blacks stay by the Blacks and the Whites stay with the Whites and the Mexicans stay with the Mexicans. Everybody sits in their little group. I guess because if I was sitting with a bunch of White kids, I am Black, if I was sitting with a bunch of White kids I would kind of feel out of place. Maybe they feel out of place. Everybody feels out of place. He doesn't encourage us to integrate. He doesn't do that. I don't think it's his fault that we all sit to ourselves. Nobody does it like, I am going to sit with the White people, they just do it. I don't think it's his fault, I don't know."

None

Some of the students reported that they have not experienced any racial bias in their class. One of those students however, did share that although he had not experienced any racial bias in high school, he experienced bias in elementary and it has remained with him for many years.

The effects of racial bias was experienced by over three fourths of the sample. In recounting their experiences, many of the students shared and displayed their irritation with the teacher/s or students. I thought it was encouraging that not all of the students has had those negative experiences.

Race of the Teacher

During the interview, the students were asked the question how their motivation was affected personally and how it affects other students motivation when the teacher is of a different race. In response to this question, there were four categories that emerged; *Decreases/Increases Motivation, Race Matters, Lack of Understanding of Culture, Race Doesn't Matter.*

Decreases/Increases Motivation

Some students suggested that having a teacher from a different racial ethnic background can decrease motivation of students. One student explained," I think sometimes it decreases their motivation because they think well, this teacher is black or white and you know, I am black or white, and maybe they don't care. Another student had this to say in reference to other students, " For other students, they come to class and they see somebody that is of a different race and they are like, they can't identify with me and they don't understand what I am going through. They don't even try to work. A lot of students

who I know are very smart, they could do advanced work, they just don't want to do it because they feel as though they would get cheated, because of teachers of different orientation." In examining an opposite affect, one student explained, ...But for me, it is sort of, if I have a teacher from a different race than me, it sort of motivates me more because I want to prove that I am not dumb or something. Being an African American male, I believe that a lot of people look down on them and don't thin they can achieve high. When I go to class, I want to prove that I am an African American male, and I can do what other people can do."

Lack of Understanding

Some students discussed that the race of the teacher makes a difference because of the lack of understanding that some teachers have of the African American culture. One student shared his opinion with the following assertion, " I think it affects the classroom a lot, because the teachers are being introduced to an environment that are from a different culture, that they don't know a lot about. I think they should have workshops that train teachers on different cultures, that they're going to be dealing with different races, so that they can understand the mood swings and the emotions that they will be dealing with."

Race Matters

Several students indicated that the race of the teacher makes a difference to students in the classroom. One student explained his belief with these comments," I think in the beginning, most black kids, if we walk into the class and we see a black person, they automatically get a certain kind of respect that we wouldn't give a Hispanic person or a white person. Once you come into a class and see a white person, white teacher or Hispanic teacher, you automatically respect them because they are an adult. (However) They have to gain your trust and be able to make you see that they are going to be able to teach you something. If in the first couple of days they don't get your respect and don't let you know that they're there to teach you and they are going to try and help you and do what they can for you, then from the moment on, they just lost it, they blew it. No matter what they do, they are not really going to get it back. If they do, it's going to be so far down the line that it's too late." The same sentiments were expressed by another student when they remarked, " .... I feel more comfortable...I would be able to get my point across better if I was talking to somebody of my own race, because I really wouldn't know how to approach Whites, Mexicans and things like that. Maybe he doesn't know how to approach Black children to teach them. That might be what it is. He don't know how to talk to us to get us to understand."

Race Doesn't Matter

Some students indicated that the race of the teacher really doesn't matter but it depends on their attitude. One student suggested that, "It doesn't matter if the teacher is doing the job right and know how to treat the students and give the students respect and the students know how to give the teacher respect and they are on an equal level. One student stated

that the thing he looks for is if the teacher will be willing to help when he needs it. The final comment is quoted from a student who remarked," It depends on the teacher's attitude toward the students. I know a lot of White teachers that have been the best teachers I ever had. It just depends on the individual, how they are affected by the environment that they are in."

In analyzing how the race of the teacher effects motivation of African American students, again, the data supports that over three fourths of the students reported that race makes a difference in the classroom. I thought it interesting that even the students that didn't experience racial bias in the classroom, still felt that the race of the teacher matters and effects students. In contrast, some of the students that reported having experienced racial bias in the classroom, stated that the race of the teacher did not matter. I was also, encouraged to note that the a teachers' attitude and methods can transcend the color of their skin.

Conclusions

The quantitative results of the study indicate that the picture that has been painted for African-American students is not as negative as many believe. Although these results are preliminary they clearly do not support the view that African-Americans have no future goals, have low perceptions of ability, or lack motivation to learn. Instead, our sample of urban students showed very positive motivational orientations when the favorite class was at issue.

In the qualitative analysis, there was also data that support reasons for disliking the least favorite class having to do with the subject itself, the class not being fun, and the teacher is boring. As the students described, the class not being fun is a reflection of the teacher's attitude. What was not clearly indicated on the quantitative results, but appears to be a tentative conclusion of the qualitative data, is the suggestion that African American students motivation can be effected when the teacher is of another race. Several of the students interviewed discussed how the race of the teacher effects them in the classroom especially when coupled with a disapproving attitude. Many students also reported incidents of racial bias that they have experienced in class. We can infer that such experiences would negatively effect the motivation of these students.

In the future, we plan to look at other variables and the perceptions of the students, to discover other reasons for when and why African-American may students experience motivation problems. We propose to explore how race and the race of the teacher influences their motivation in the classroom and school. An examination of peer influences will also be included in the search for influences on motivation.